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U.S. Ties To Australia Still Good

New Zealand Dispute Has Little Impact

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CANBERRA, Australia—The United States and New Zealand are unlikely to resolve their dispute over port visits in the near future, but the row does not appear to have affected crucial U.S. ties to Australia and may have strengthened relations, according to diplomats and government officials here.

They said the impact of New Zealand's decision three months ago to ban nuclear-armed U.S. ships has been more limited than they had feared in Australia and the islands of the South Pacific.

The outgoing U.S. ambassador to Australia, Robert D. Nesen, recently said at a farewell dinner in Sydney that the relationship between Australia and the United States is now as strong and perhaps stronger than it has ever been.

But many Australians are beginning to wonder whether New Zealand will be able to reverse its antinuclear policy, even under a new government. New Zealand Prime Minister David Lange's decision to reject a request by the United States for a port call at the end of January has gained widespread support in New Zealand and an attempt to reverse that decision might be highly divisive for New Zealand, Australian analysts said.

Australia, New Zealand and the United States have been linked in a mutual defense alliance known as ANZUS since 1952. Since New Zealand's denial of a U.S. port visit, however, the United States has cut off military exercises involving that country and restricted the flow of intelligence to it. In the view of some Australians, those moves reflect a heavy-handedness by the United States. They said Washington may be stirring nationalistic feelings in New Zealand. To help make up for the cutoff of American defense cooperation, Australia has agreed to provide New Zealand with more data from its intelligence operations in the South Pacific and Southeast Asia.

Public sentiment in Australia is, in some ways, the reverse of that in New Zealand. A poll conducted among 2,000 Australians of voting age during the last two weekends of March showed that 65 percent of the group said Australia should allow U.S. Navy vessels to visit its ports and 27 percent said they should be excluded.

On the question of what Australia's position should be in the U.S.-New Zealand argument, the largest group, 37 percent, said Australia should remain neutral and 35 percent said Australia should support the U.S. position.

The poll was conducted by The Age, one of Australia's leading newspapers.

Although New Zealand's decision to ban such port calls has boosted the morale of antinuclear activists in this country, it has done little to change the real balance of political forces in Australia, officials said.

According to the most recent poll among 1,000 New Zealanders of voting age, approval of the New Zealand ban on nuclear armed vessels has risen from 73 percent to 77 percent. But when asked to choose between defense ties to the United

States and port visits by nuclear armed ships, 44.8 percent said they preferred to break defense ties with Washington, 45.3 percent said they preferred to allow nuclear armed ships to visit and 9.9 percent said they did not know, according to the Heylen poll, conducted March 23 for a New Zealand television station.